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What was it like for you?

The experiences of organisations providing Bristol's Emergency Food Response to Covid-19 (the BRIEF study)

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- In the report which follows we have taken care to ensure quotes cannot be linked to individuals or organisations

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Aims and approach

- Out study aimed to understand the rapid roll out of emergency food provision in Bristol during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic
- We were wanted to learn what a different organisations had done, what had worked well, and think about lessons for future waves of disruption and increased food insecurity
- We used qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, seeking a range of views and rich understanding
- We spoke to a range of different organisations in Bristol about how they had been providing food to vulnerable people during the first COVID-19 lockdown

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Who we spoke to

27 Qualitative interviews with 30 individuals, July - October

Provider Types	Number	Model of provision
Food Club	7	Membership provision, members buy subsidised food to families in need
Meal Service	4	Supplying frozen or ready to eat meals. Focussed on those without access to kitchens, those not able to shop, and NHS workers
Food Parcels	6	Supplying free parcels/boxes of food Some provided emergency provision only (e.g. food banks, support to shielded groups), others longer term support. Some community organisations who could offer their usual services turned to offering food parcels during lockdown
Education providers	6	Mixed provision: School meals continued in some cases, vouchers (national and local versions) used by most at some point, food parcels provided some of the time by some.
Infrastructure/coordination	4	Provided coordination, support or resources to other organisations. Some also 'triaged' support to people in need by linking them to support locally including referrals to food providers.

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We spoke to organisations in most parts of the City



Many organisations had city-wide reach, those that were locality based were in wards with greater deprivation

Detailed findings on each of the following topics are available

- Changes to demand during lockdown
- Perceived barriers to take up of services
- Challenges experienced during lockdown
- Sources of food and other resources
- Food provided: healthiness and choice
- Non-food benefits
- The role of volunteers
- Experiences of education providers
- The experiences of new food providers

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Organisations experienced 3-phases of lockdown

- Phase 1: Crisis response
 - Finding the right people, using spare capacity, getting money and food to those who can use it
 - Both new ways of working and new providers of food emerged. It was hard work, but people felt energised and focussed
- Phase 2: Rapid roll out
 - Organisation began reaching isolated people who were not managing
 - It was rewarding and important work
 - "people were saying that it was a life saver...we had a couple of people crying because they were just overwhelmed ...And we had a couple of families and they said you're the only other people that we've seen for weeks" (Food Club)*
- Phase 3: Fatigue
 - The long hours, lack of breaks or down time had built up, and organisations were beginning to think about what would happen next.
 - "I don't think we ever really thought about exhaustion or tiredness. We just thought, you know what? We'll just keep going, it won't last forever" (School)*

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"I think my organization has just done a fantastic job"

Individual and organisations pulled together to make sure no one in Bristol went hungry during this exceptional time

"It was a period where we just had to go for it. We knew it was going to be hard and we knew we were gonna be tired but we just we just did it and I think that's kind of what I'm most proud of" (Food Club)

It's just been the most kind of incredible time in all the ways, you know, high highs and low lows. I think at the start of this we could have never imagined the amount of support that we had from people... who have worked for us for like three days a week for free" (Meal Service)

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New relationships and collaborations were formed

- Many examples of organisations coming together in different ways to support each other and people in need
- This was particularly valued when this involved new relationships and partnerships coming together, and that this was “a legacy for future work” (School)

“You know, from one conversation...they would be a brand partner and the next day we had food going out to them”
(Infrastructure Charity)

“[I want us to be] working together to provide some progression for families” (Food Club)

- Some organisations commented on the competition between providers in the 3rd sector, and time wasted competing for the same resources

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City wide collaboration

- Particularly early in lockdown, great examples of cross-city work

“Really focussed...really joined up collaboration” (Infrastructure Charity)

There is a fantastic food and voluntary and public sector network in Bristol. That isn't just the size of the city, it is also about the openness of the way people work” (Food Club)

“at the beginning of lockdown, there were council and all the big actors together and have these weekly meetings and they kind of tailed off...I found them absolutely indispensable and they made for a way more efficiently run project” (Meal Service)

- BUT not everyone felt included and some people felt crucial support was missing

“sometimes the response was a bit wobbly, or wasn't really there or the support wasn't really there...you're left waiting and there's no clear direction or point of contact and that was difficult” (Meal Service)

“the city responded really well at a project level but that the planning never reached above this - it stayed in the detail too much and no-one had a strategic view” (Infrastructure Charity)

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Staff and volunteers worked exceptionally hard, and exhaustion was common

“I need a pool! And someone just bringing me drinks” (School)

“I am really tired emotionally and physically... very, very stressful...constantly trying to figure out new ways to make sure that we could support people and you effectively have people's kind of lives perched in your hands for a brief moment, and if I say no they might not eat for another four days” (Meal Service)

“That's part of the problem with food, like everything's third sector organisations and they're all exhausted. And we're about to hit the biggest recession and about potentially to have another second wave and we've just burned out a lot of the resources that we have because a lot of work that people put in is unpaid labour and they just haven't got the energy or motivation to carry on” (Meal Service)

Most organisations were relying on donated food

It was not always easy for charities to make sure that people were receiving a healthy, balanced diet, and that food needs (such as allergies or religious needs) could be accommodated

“Nobody went hungry...don't get me wrong, we were really grateful for what we were able to provide. But it wasn't really a well-balanced, nutritional diet” (Food Parcel)

“I won't say it's unhealthy. It is perhaps not the things I would choose to put in” (Food Club)

“a global pandemic isn't the time to educate someone's palate.”
(Meal Service)

Which models are best for those receiving food?

- Delivery of food was disproportionately resource intensive
- Unfamiliar foods are seldom popular
- Schools, in particular, valued vouchers above meal services or food parcels:

"Because the feedback I got is parents could plan meals and be actually more economically savvy rather than being bound by what was in a food parcel, which is basically our choice.... So for me, that's where I wouldn't go back to the way we did food parcels again... I think what that did is empowered parents to be part of it... I think going full circle when the children have come back to school on the 1st of September, they look like they've eaten well. They tell us about some of the meals that they had" (School)

People were worried about the future, but ready to step up again

"But the other thing is that for the next six months... a huge proportion of this growth has been based on temporary resources.... But that's changed. We've got loads of volunteers that [have been on furlough who] are going back... We know we are fragile" (Infrastructure Charity)

And will the public give again, even if they have money, will they give again?" (Meal Service)

"So, yes, we are bracing ourselves for a second wave. But like I said, I think we're far better prepared now to cope with that. And it won't be such a shock to the system" (Food Parcel)

Lessons for the future

- Moving beyond crisis
 - We need to protect the health of organisations and those who work for them
- Moving from responsive to strategic planning
 - Key coordination roles should be more visible
 - Common protocols and organisational support
 - We need cross city information about which schemes have reached which people, and who might be missing
 - We should make key coordination role visible, so organisations know who to ask for help

Conclusions

As a city, we should be incredibly proud of the work of the charity sector and our local authority in getting food to people at a really difficult time. And we should be very grateful to the many businesses and individuals who generously gave their time, money or goods.

But it is also important to learn from this experience, and in the long term we need to think about the best way to reduce food insecurity in Bristol.